

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE

SPECIAL AGENT

OF THE

BOARD OF EDUCATION.

JANUARY, 1875.

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REPORT.

Gentlemen of the Board of Education:—

During the past year, I have visited 391 schools in 74 towns and cities. I have observed the methods of teaching and management, and in nearly all have taught one or more topics, and made suggestions and brief addresses. Exclusive of the exercises in the eight Teachers' Institutes attended in the autumn, I have given fifty-seven lectures on educational topics to teachers and to people. In my visits to the schools, I have generally been accompanied, as heretofore, by the school committee or by the superintendent of schools. I take great pleasure in acknowledging, in this connection, the uniform courtesy extended to me by school officers, teachers, children, and by all with whom I have been associated. The general interest manifested leads me to hope that my labors serve to encourage and stimulate to greater activity those engaged in the work of education.

I am happy to note, as a sign of progress in public sentiment, the approval by committees and people of rational methods of teaching. This is shown by the demand for good teachers, and the effort to retain those who have proved themselves competent to teach. It is shown in the increased attention bestowed, especially in the larger places, upon the arrangement of courses of study, in all of which more time is given to object-teaching and illustrations, and to general exercises. In many towns, evening schools are established, and meetings of teachers are held regularly. Provision is made for the attendance of teachers upon Teachers' Institutes, and upon the State and County Associations; and teachers gladly avail themselves of the privileges thus offered.

The required study of drawing, so long neglected, is coming to be recognized as a useful and necessary branch of education, and is receiving considerable attention in many of the schools. Evening classes of adults for the practice of mechanical drawing have been started this year for the first time, in some of the larger manufacturing places. Those which have come under my observation, as those at Adams and Holyoke, are well attended and give assurance of great usefulness. The students in these classes, embrace operatives, book-keepers and overseers in the mills, tradesmen, and mechanics of all trades. This branch of education is greatly indebted to Mr. Walter Smith, State Director of Art-Education, whose skill in delineation, and not less in statement, encourages the most timid to take the first step—the step which costs—in teaching this new art.

Another sign of progress, and a very hopeful one, is the relaxing of the hold upon the district system, which seems to have been particularly firm in some portions of this section of the State. It would now be easy, I think, to obtain the signatures of the most influential citizens in nearly all the towns at present under this system, for its immediate abolition. The school committees would be a unit in this direction. Instead of awaiting the slow, but inevitable process of sloughing off, will they not make and circulate petitions for the removal altogether, and at once, of this excrescence upon the school system? In several instances, the district system has been abolished since my previous visit. One result which uniformly follows the abolition, is better school-houses. In many places the necessity for better houses is forcing abolition upon the town. The sooner the towns make a virtue of this necessity, the better for all concerned. With the abolition of the districts, wise counsels should prevail as to the grading of the schools; as to the locating, heating, lighting and ventilation of houses, building or remodelling; as to the several acts relating to uniting districts with those of adjoining towns; to conveying to school children living at great distances; to uniting several towns under one supervision, etc., etc.

It would be agreeable to say much more in commendation of the schools. Justice demands that I should testify to the faithfulness of the teachers in general, and I might specify important particulars in which very many of the schools are

eminently successful, and particular schools which are models of excellence, but the brevity of this Report forbids farther details; and I pass to notice a few of the needs of the schools, such as result mainly from the want of the most enlightened public sentiment. I will specify first the need of a more efficient supervision. In some instances, the towns grudgingly pay the pittance charged for the altogether too-infrequent visits of the committee to the schools; and in many, the task of superintending the schools has come to be so thankless, that those best fitted for the duties refuse to accept the office of school committee. Unquestionably, the worst possible form of supervision is that which results from the district system, where the selection of the teachers is left to a prudential committee, and the oversight of their work, perhaps, to a sub-committee of the general committee to whom are assigned the schools of a particular section of the town. The best results are secured by placing the inspection and direction of the schools in the hands of a single person, competent and able to devote himself to giving advice in all matters pertaining to the teaching and general management of the schools, he acting under the full committee as an advisory and authoritative board. This plan is virtually adopted in most of the larger places and in many of the smaller ones, and uniformly with most satisfactory results. An important duty devolved upon the school committee by statute, is that of assisting the teacher in the organization of the school. This includes the preparation of a course of study and the arrangement of the classes. It would seem, also, to imply that previous to entering upon the duties of the school, the teachers should be definitely advised as to the particular work to be accomplished, according to the plan of the committee. Another duty of the committee is to prescribe text-books to be used, and to see that none others be introduced into the schools. Is it less a duty to see that all the pupils are furnished with books, and especially with slate and pencil, at the opening session of the school? The children are frequently many days without books, and even an entire term; in many instances without slate and pencil. However watchful the teacher may be, no ingenuity can keep idle hands out of mischief. The slate and pencil are indispensable for every school-child, and delinquency here should be anticipated by the school committee, and

provided for at the start. Another duty which devolves upon the school committee, is to provide the schools with suitable apparatus and reference-books, and all needed appliances for carrying on the work of the schools. With rare exceptions, the schools are perfectly barren of every means of illustration, except, indeed, the blackboard and crayon, and these are frequently nothing of what they ought to be, and everything that they ought not to be. The boards are both short and narrow; they are rough or glazed and greasy; their surface is soft and gummy, or worn with age; they hang dangling from nails with straps or strings; the good name they bear is often a misnomer; and the crayon is yet too often a large, shapeless lump of flinty chalk, and occasionally there is none even of that. It is provided by statute that the school committee may expend twenty-five per cent. of the town's share of the income of the school fund for the purchase of apparatus and books of reference. If this duty were faithfully discharged for three years, and if the judicious use of such purchases were secured in the schools, their efficiency would be increased full twenty-five per cent. The bare mention of these several duties, and they are but a part of what is required of the school-committee man, will serve to show how largely the success of the schools depends upon him, and the necessity of bestowing the office with pretty full power upon one well qualified for the duties, and suitably compensating and otherwise supporting him in their discharge.

From a misapprehension of the ends to be accomplished by the schools, many persons are employed to teach who have neither zeal nor fitness for their calling; and even well-qualified teachers are sometimes compelled to pursue traditional and often irrational methods in the schools. In very many, the whole time is spent in brief recitations of mere words, and where something more is attempted than committing to memory meaningless expressions, the facts learned are so disassociated as to be of little or no use to the learner. The pages of arithmetics, geographies and grammars are committed to memory, but the knowledge of *arithmetic*, *geography* and *grammar* is not acquired. This results from classifying the schools wholly upon the pages passed over in the text-books, and frequently requires half as many classes in a single branch as there are pupils, and in all the branches recitations of eight or ten minutes throughout

the day. Whereas, if the classification were made according to the knowledge actually possessed by the pupils, or upon what is really the proper basis,—the development of the mind,—the classes might be reduced to a very small number, and the schools be made to assist nature, in aid of which alone they can in justice be maintained.

The aphorism, "Teach but one thing at a time," is quite too literally applied in the schools generally; thus, mental and written arithmetic, as at present pursued, are distinct studies, and not only require separate text-books, but the slate and pencil are not allowed as an aid in the one, whilst the mental process is equally ignored in the other. Now, the mental process and the written expression are naturally associated, the latter being the sign, the former the thing signified; hence they should be taught together, the one for the sake of the other. So in the study of language; reading, composition, and grammatical analysis, which are mutually dependent, are frequently taught as independently as if one were a branch of physics, one of metaphysics, the other of mathematics. So, again, in the study of geography: it is a study of petty details, of particular rivers or mountains, seldom of systems. A great element of beauty in this study is the relations which exist in the different features of the earth, as between river and mountain systems; between towns and river navigation or railroad routes; between bays and harbors and commercial cities; between climates and peoples, soils and industries; between the directions and elevations of land, masses and productions;—without these relations the study of geography is as empty of all mental aliment as the wind. By thus clothing these skeleton forms of the school-room with their relations of beauty, by thus associating things which have a natural dependence in the branches taught, they come to be a true means of education. And, again, in learning to read; if, instead of being required to learn the alphabet, then to spell out in the most painful manner the words of the reading lesson, the child should be led to observe the parts and properties of objects. then to make oral expressions of the thought excited, then to write these expressions upon the slate or board, and finally to read these written expressions, the slow and laborious process of learning to read would become an incidental means of developing the powers of observation, memory and imagination, and

the child would at once acquire the habit of expressing his thoughts intelligently, orally and in writing. He would read with expression, and learn the elementary sounds and letters of the language with perfect ease; and with proper objects as the occasion for the exercise of his faculties, he would at the same time become familiar with the elements of the natural sciences, of grammatical analysis, of history, and of many other things. In fine, to secure the best results in the schools as they are, the needs are an enlightened public sentiment, a careful supervision, and knowledge, skill and enthusiasm in the teachers. I esteem it a privilege to have been permitted to labor for the promotion of these means.

Having previously become pretty well acquainted with the methods of teaching in the schools generally, I have thought it advisable, for the past year, more frequently to assemble the teachers and people for illustrative exercises and addresses, even if less of my time was spent in the schools. This seems to me to be good policy for the future.

GEO. A. WALTON,

Agent for the Western Counties.

WESTFIELD, January 1, 1875.

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